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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in the activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/118 of 17 December 2003, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to take into consideration the progress of the White Helmets initiative since its inception and, in view of the success of coordinated actions carried out since then, to consider their impact and to analyse possible steps and modalities to enhance the integration of the White Helmets initiative within the work of the United Nations system and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session. The General Assembly subsequently decided, in its resolution 58/316, that the item should be allocated for consideration every three years.

2. The present report covers the period from July 2003 to July 2006. It provides an overview of progress made in collaboration with different partners, in particular with the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission of Argentina, reviews existing tools in the light of resource mobilization, and concludes with practical recommendations on the future of the initiate.

3. The White Helmets initiative and its development into the partnership with the United Nations Volunteers are highly appreciated by many parties. Member States, United Nations country offices and the many individuals and organizations consulted considered the programme a useful mechanism in support of humanitarian activities.

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4. Within the framework envisaged in General Assembly resolutions 49/139 B, 50/19, 52/171, 54/98, 56/102 and 58/118, the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission, continues to actively support the expansion of the programme, in collaboration with the United Nations Volunteers. The partnership between the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission is an example of how the White Helmets concept and its modalities can be applied successfully. While most activities were carried out through the partnership, other countries have designated focal points through which a widening of the initiative can be explored and pursued.

II. Programme activities

5. As soon as Argentina had recovered from its difficult political and economic situation, the Government of Argentina renewed its permanent commitment to the White Helmets initiative as the primary contributor to the United Nations Volunteers programme.

6. Since the previous report (A/58/320), the activities of the White Helmets initiative have focused on the following three areas:

(a) Dissemination of the concept of volunteerism and, specifically, of the White Helmets initiative, through training programmes for young people;

(b) Support to Latin American and Caribbean countries in strengthening their capacity to respond to emergencies, hunger and poverty, at the local level;

(c) Response to requests made by Governments or by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other relevant entities of the United Nations system for assistance in emergencies around the world.

7. The following activities, among others, have been undertaken by the partnership between the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission, in the three aforementioned areas:

(a) Dissemination of the concept of volunteerism

- Two youth training sessions for 150 people each were held every year to disseminate the concept of volunteerism and to strengthen the skills of young leaders. The participants were selected among local leaders who had assisted people in need during the past social and economic crisis. They were trained at the Argentine Joint Peacekeeping Operation Training Centre during a one-week intensive course. The skills acquired were then used to develop assistance programmes in depressed areas at the local level. As requested by the provinces, similar training was made available locally.

- White Helmets regional seminars for the dissemination of volunteerism were held in South American countries (Montevideo, September 2004) and in Central America (Panama, December 2004). Finally, the first White Helmets focal point meeting was held in Buenos Aires, in December 2005.

- An international day of volunteers is celebrated by the White Helmets Commission every year. The event features a message from the Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers programme. The fact that a

thousand people attend each meeting shows the impact of volunteerism in the United Nations Volunteers-White Helmets Commission partnership.

- A seminar on mental health support after disasters was held by the United Nations Volunteers-White Helmets Commission partnership (Buenos Aires in 2005), and a White Helmets presentation was made at the Mercosur stand at the fourth World Social Forum (Caracas in 2006).

- Participation of the White Helmets in the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, in January 2005 and the Third International Conference on Early Warning in Bonn, Germany, in March 2006.

- White Helmets volunteers were members of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team in Panama in 2006.

(b) Support to Latin America and Caribbean countries

- A total of 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries have officially designated their focal points for the White Helmets regional network: Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Argentina. Belize, Haiti and the Dominican Republic are expected to designate their focal points in the near future.

- Several relief missions have provided support in the Latin American and Caribbean region: control of foot-and-mouth disease along the Argentina/Paraguay border (2004); the struggle against Chagas disease (Argentina, 2004); the response to the emergency situation due to exceptional frost (Peru, 2004); the response to Hurricanes Stan, Dennis and Wilma (Cuba, Guatemala and El Salvador, 2005); the aftermath of the supermarket fire (Paraguay, 2005); the response to the flood in Ecuador (2005); and the promotion and coordination of volunteers for emergencies in the framework of the activities of the Young Catholic Association and the Civil Defence (Uruguay, 2005/06).

- A White Helmets volunteer medical doctor was selected by the United Nations Volunteers to assist the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti. He is currently director of Gonaïves hospital. Many airlifts and shipments with donations to Haiti were coordinated thanks to the White Helmets Commission.

(c) Response to requests for emergency assistance

- Despite the prioritization of the Latin American and Caribbean area, the White Helmets initiative maintains its permanent commitment to respond to the most important emergency situations around the world when local governments or the United Nations make such a request. The White Helmets made important contributions in the period under review: airlift services to Indonesia (2005); supplies to Pakistan after the earthquake (2005); and during the Lebanon crisis when the United Nations Volunteers-White Helmets were invited to the United Nations Joint Logistics Centre in Cyprus and sent a humanitarian cargo through the International Committee of the Red Cross to Beirut (2006).

- In 2005, a team specialized in post-disaster social and mental health was deployed to Louisiana at the request of the United States Government. A total of 18 professional volunteers (psychiatrists, psychologists, medical doctors,

social workers and logistics experts) highly experienced in emergencies and disasters supported the mental health staff and the community of New Orleans, Jefferson Parish and Kenner, in Louisiana State, and trained them to assist people in that situation and for emergency preparedness. In 2006, a follow-up session was organized for the White Helmets team, in accordance with agreed procedures, and the mission was recognized for its valuable contribution by the Governor and the people of Louisiana and also by the President of the United States.

III. Existing mechanisms and partnerships

8. All activities of the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission continued to be implemented within the framework of humanitarian assistance and development programmes of United Nations agencies, directly responding to requests from host Governments or United Nations funds, programmes and agencies.

9. During the reporting period, activities were undertaken in collaboration with United Nations agencies such as UNDP, but also in response to appeals by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and requests by similar national institutions in beneficiary countries.

10. As stated in the previous report of the Secretary-General, the White Helmets concept could be translated into a valuable assistance modality through further expanding the initiative's concept by replicating it with other multilateral funding institutions, national volunteer corps, civil society and other relevant entities.

IV. Financing and resources mobilization

11. The Special Voluntary Fund of the United Nations Volunteers was endorsed and established by the General Assembly in resolution 49/139 B. A number of Member States have expressed interest in supporting the special financing window through cash or contributions in kind. The Government of Argentina, however, continues to be the primary contributor to the United Nations Volunteers special financing window. It is hoped that other Member States will be further encouraged to contribute in the near future. Fund-raising activities have been conducted by the White Helmets Commission in the European Union.

12. A regional technical cooperation agreement signed by the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank and the White Helmets Commission of Argentina for volunteer operations is still in force. A special fund administered by the Organization of American States is open to contributions from all member States.

V. Concluding observations

13. The concept of preidentified standby teams of trained volunteers as embodied in the White Helmets approach is seen as a valuable modality made available to the United Nations Volunteers programme, in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities. Observations made

concerning the joint programming of activities conducted by the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission indicate that an increasing number of Member States have designated their focal points and are in the process of strengthening their volunteer capacities in support of the White Helmets initiative. Many others are willing to consider it.

14. Taking into account General Assembly resolution 58/118, the Government of Argentina once more ratified its support for the White Helmets initiative and increased its budget programme. It is hoped that additional financial contributions to the special financing window for United Nations Volunteers can be mobilized so that the United Nations Volunteers, the White Helmets Commission and other participating Governments can build upon these successes, thereby making possible the replication of the initiative in other Member States.

15. The General Assembly may wish to reaffirm its support for the White Helmets initiative as expressed in resolutions 49/139 B, 52/171, 54/98, 56/102 and 58/118, and to request the relevant Member States and the United Nations system to further strengthen and apply this modality to address the needs arising from humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters. This is deemed particularly relevant to strengthening United Nations capacities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals through the involvement of volunteer services.

16. More than 10 years have passed since the first General Assembly resolution on the White Helmets initiative (49/139 B), during which time the initiative has become well established and a recognized part of the humanitarian system. Taking into account the efforts made by Argentina despite the crisis experienced at the beginning of this century and in the light of the current United Nations reform process, the General Assembly may wish to consider how to further develop and improve the White Helmets initiative in coordination with the United Nations, and to analyse the viability of the incorporation of the initiative into the United Nations system.